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The Illawarra beaches 1900-1945: a place to become bronzed

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Abstract

It was not until the early 1900s that the Australian beach first emerged as a western recreational space. Swimming (known as surf bathing) became a legalised practice, surf lifesaving became institutionalised and activities such as surfing were introduced; all things that make up an important part of Australian culture today. This article examines the emergence of the surf lifesaving movement in the Illawarra between 1900 and 1945. By analysing surf club records the beach space can be seen as a place that has been 'made' and socially constructed. The surf lifesaving discourse brings insights into the beach making processes and the discursive practices that socially construct the beach. It raises questions of who the surf lifesavers were as well as investigates what processes and practices were involved to become 'bronzed'; to attain the prized bronze medallion. The analysis of the surf lifesaving discourse portrays it to be prescriptive and regulating with embedded themes of masculinity, humanitarianism, discipline, eugenics and nationalism. This article is work related to my PhD research on leisure spaces of the Illawarra beaches between 1900 and 1945. It aims to examine the emergence and social construction of surf lifesaving in the Illawarra. Surf club records¹ from the early 1900s to 1945 have been utilised to help shed light into how the surf lifesaving movement has been socially constructed through discourse and discursive practices. I was able to access surf club minutes, annual reports and other historical material regarding membership, carnivals, fundraising, recommendations and requests to council, revenue, and club histories. Surf reports (often called 'Surf Notes') published in the *Illawarra Mercury*, written by publicity officers from the various Illawarra surf clubs, were also used. This article raises questions about who the surf lifesavers were and also investigates the processes and practices involved in becoming 'bronzed', attaining the prized surf bronze medallion.

Keywords

Illawarra, beaches, 1900, 1945, place, become, bronzed

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The Illawarra beaches 1900-1945: a place to become bronzed

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It was not until the early 1900s that the Australian beach first emerged as a western recreational space. Swimming (known as surf bathing) became a legalised practice, surf lifesaving became institutionalised and activities such as surfing were introduced; all things that make up an important part of Australian culture today. This article examines the emergence of the surf lifesaving movement in the Illawarra between 1900 and 1945. By analysing surf club records the beach space can be seen as a place that has been 'made' and socially constructed. The surf lifesaving discourse brings insights into the beach making processes and the discursive practices that socially construct the beach. It raises questions of who the surf lifesavers were as well as investigates what processes and practices were involved to become 'bronzed'; to attain the prized bronze medallion. The analysis of the surf lifesaving discourse portrays it to be prescriptive and regulating with embedded themes of masculinity, humanitarianism, discipline, eugenics and nationalism.

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This article is work related to my PhD research on leisure spaces of the Illawarra beaches between 1900 and 1945. It aims to examine the emergence and social construction of surf lifesaving in the Illawarra. Surf club records¹ from the early 1900s to 1945 have been utilised to help shed light into how the surf lifesaving movement has been socially constructed through discourse and discursive practices. I was able to access surf club minutes, annual reports and other historical material regarding membership, carnivals, fundraising, recommendations and requests to council, revenue, and club histories. Surf reports (often called 'Surf Notes') published in the *Illawarra Mercury*, written by publicity officers from the various Illawarra surf clubs, were also used. This article raises questions about who the surf lifesavers were and also investigates the processes and practices involved in becoming 'bronzed', attaining the prized surf bronze medallion.

Historical and social context

In 1900, bathing laws were in force across Australia, having been introduced in the late 19th century. These legal codes were inherited from the English judicial system and code of morality² and included the restriction of bathing hours as well as regulating bathing costumes and beach activities. Until 1903, bathing in NSW was prohibited 'near to or within view of any public wharf, key, bridge, street, road or other public resort within the limits of any of the towns between the hours of 6 o'clock in the morning and 8 in the evening.'³ When daylight bathing was permitted, mixed bathing was prohibited^{4,5} and regulation neck to knee bathing costumes were to be worn at all times by people 8 years and over.⁶ Even in 1935 it was a civil offence to bathe in 'any river, lake, harbour or stream'⁷ unless clothed in a regulation bathing costume. Beach inspectors were employed to uphold the law and there were penalties for lawbreakers.^{8, 9, 10} Some beach inspectors were more zealous than others. There is mention of an 'inspector of nuisances', Inspector Leahy from Manly, working from 5am until midnight to ensure that there were no lawbreakers.¹¹ A male bather from Manly was fined one shilling for removing the top half of his bathing costume as late as 1936.¹²

Despite these stringent bathing restrictions of the late 19th and early 20th Century, sea bathing and the sea air have had a long history of being regarded as health measures. In 17th Century Europe salt water was believed to be a cure for various ills. Doctors thought it a cure for insanity and would have patients lowered by chains or ropes into the sea as an early type of shock treatment.¹³ By the late 19th Century in Australia, the sea and sea air were thought to be therapeutic^{14, 15} curing even epilepsy and hysteric attacks, and it was drunk as a tonic until the 1930s.¹⁶ Seaside communities were heralded as health resorts, health spas, and tourist resorts. It has been suggested in the literature, particularly by Rodwell, that bathing and beach activities were 'eugenically inspired activities'¹⁷ contributing to

the physical side of the Australian racial development; including mental hygiene:

An amusement which has sprung up lately in Australia on the sea-coast and which promises much to improve the physique of the race.¹⁸

White Australia had 'at last found a use' for the beach and turned it into 'a real pleasure ground for the people, a place whither they may repair in search of health and brimming enjoyment'.¹⁹ This eugenic perspective blatantly disregarded the indigenous people with their cultural and spiritual attachment to the beach.

The wider Australian social context of bathing and the beach applies to my research site, the Illawarra beaches. These beaches are situated in New South Wales (NSW), from Bald Hill in the north to the Shoalhaven River in the south. As in the rest of NSW, similar notions about bathing and health existed in the Illawarra. The coastal town of Wollongong was referred to as the 'New Brighton', after the sea-side resort in East Sussex, England.²⁰ In 1856 a hotel named 'The Brighton' was built overlooking Brighton Beach in Wollongong (now called North Beach). The proprietor launched a public bathing machine²¹ (a converted boat) in 1857 allowing the public to swim in safety and in relative privacy for a shilling a swim. It has been claimed to be the first of its kind in Australia. Between 1900 and 1945 NSW Government Ordinance 52, containing bathing by-laws, applied in the Illawarra and became part of the Local Government Act of 1919.

Surf lifesaving was introduced to the Illawarra in 1907, a year after the Bondi Surf Bathers' Life Saving Club was formed in Sydney. In 1922 there were 11 surf clubs in the Illawarra and by 1945 there were 16 clubs with 633 members.²² The achievement of the prestigious bronze medallion became the goal of surf club members, with 66 instructors' certificates and 600 bronzes recorded as having been attained in the Illawarra, between 1914 and 1930.²³ Surf carnivals had a large following from the beginning of the surf club movement. In 1909 there is a record of over 2,000 people attending the first interclub carnival between Bellambi and Thirroul.²⁴ In 1923, *The South Coast Times* reported that 'attendance numbered upwards of four thousand' at a Corrimall surf carnival.²⁵ Surf lifesaving continued during World War II, however, restrictions made operation difficult. Transport by car, bus or train to carnivals was prohibited due to petrol rationing²⁶ and in the 1941-42 season all surf carnivals were cancelled.²⁷

Rethinking the Illawarra beaches in relational terms

In this article the Illawarra beach space is examined in relational terms, where the social elements of the beach are seen as an ongoing process and never made complete: 'space is always in a process of becoming. It is always being made.'²⁸

The intersection of social activities and social relations that comprise the social world of the beach are always dynamic and mutually constitutive where "each new layer interacts with and 'merges' with previous layers in a process which adds new characteristics and changes existing ones, or may even suppress and obliterate aspects of 'the old'."²⁹ The beach space is seen as a 'progressive sense of place',³⁰ a process that is 'unfixed', 'contested', 'open and porous', with layer upon layer of social relations accumulating over time.³¹ The beach is a 'matrix of power geometries'³² linking the practices, meanings and people at a range of spatial scales. It establishes and maintains certain relationships to produce particular social geographies, while at the same time erases certain people and activities.

According to Foucault power 'produces discourse'.³³ Foucault's concept of 'power-knowledge' enables insights into how discursive structures operate to normalise activities, objects and practices that comprise the beach space. Foucauldian conceptualisation perceives the beach space as an 'intersection of configured social relations' embedded in power relations.³⁴ Not only is the beach made through social relations but it mutually constitutes subjectivities. Practices that comprise the beach space are the effects of different discourses and discursive structures. A conceptual framework depicting the relationality of the beach is given to help clarify how Foucault's ideas are applied in this article (Fig.1). The framework begins with the understanding that the beach space contains both material and social dimensions. As a social construct it will take on different forms depending on the time and place in which it is created. The framework emphasises how power operates through relations and how knowledge and meaning are produced through discourse. It also highlights differences and uneven power relations. The five elements of the framework: space-time of the beach, people, meanings, identities as practices and material spaces represent processes and objects that are all discursive and interrelated; each element being mutually constitutive.

The space-time of the beach is regulated by powers that instigate the rules and regulations of beach practice, such as the hours and activities legally allowed on the beach. The material space is shaped through the planning and enforcing of these regulations. Discursive practices designate what are considered 'normal' beach practices, for example, the segregated bathing, regulated bathing costumes and bathing hours of the early 1900s. The material space of the beach is categorized into specific areas depending on the particular discursive practices present, such as promenading, sunbathing, bathing, and surfing.

Surf lifesavers and their identities can be applied to the conceptual framework (Fig. 1). The beach space is created and enacted socially by people. The subject positions of people in the beach space, such as the surf lifesavers, are understood

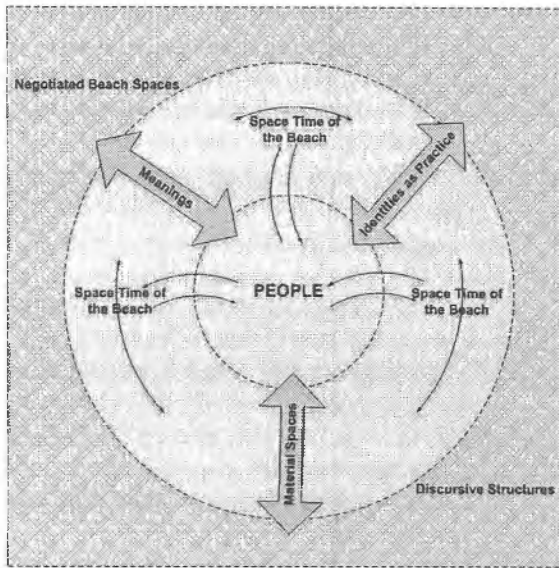


Fig. 1. Conceptualising relational leisure spaces of the beach

to be produced within discourse. Lifesavers discursively create sets of shared (and, or contested) meanings about their identity, such as discipline, fitness and strength with patriotic ideals of national identity, service and community. The particular surf club activities that take place in the beach space are conceptualised through the discursive structures of surf lifesaving. These discursive structures in turn, normalise the behaviour and activities of lifesavers on the beach.

Unpacking the meanings of surf club records

To maintain rigour in research there is a need to be reflexive and to see knowledge as partial and situated.³⁵ Feminist geographers have proposed an attempt to situate knowledge by making the researcher accountable to their position.³⁶

³⁷ I am aware that my positionality (see my personal biography, this volume p. 243) inevitably affects the data selection, analysis and research findings. I am also aware that my reading of the surf club texts is only one way of interpreting them. Themes of masculinity, humanitarianism, discipline and nationalism are found embedded in the surf club discourse between 1900 and 1945. These themes are all interrelated but for ease they will be discussed separately.

Masculinity and mateship

From the early 1900s to 1945, full surf club members were predominantly local men from white, working class and middle class backgrounds. The surf

club discourse celebrates masculinity and whiteness. It silences Indigenous peoples with their cultural attachment to the beach space and reduces female involvement to auxiliary roles. By the early 1930s the lifesaver was 'the epitome of Australian masculinity',³⁸ a 'national icon' of 'superb manhood'.³⁹ Surf clubs were white, male institutions and club houses, 'sacred male spaces'.^{40, 41} The surf club discourse celebrates mateship with emphasis on teamwork in training, patrols and competition.⁴² Tributes, in true mateship style, were paid to club mates who passed away:

...the members of the Woonona Surf Life Saving Club kept alive the memories of their late club mate, Bill Curtiss. Members marched from the entrance to the grave, where a glass covered wreath...done in the club colours of white and black was placed on the grave by the president.⁴³

Congratulations were attributed to club members 'on the advent of another surfer to the family' or 'on the arrival of a bonny son'⁴⁴, keeping alive father/son relationships and masculinity within the clubs.

Female exclusion

Initially, surf clubs of the Surf Bathing Association (SBA) allowed females to attain the bronze medallion and gain full member status. The ladies branch of the Wollongong Life-Saving Club opened at North Beach in 1913 and there is mention of four women receiving their 'bronzes' in 1914.⁴⁵ However, the records indicate that this is the only account of females receiving their bronzes in the Illawarra prior to 1980. One reason given for female exclusion in NSW was that they 'squandered' funds during a picnic organised for surf club supporters.⁴⁶ However, it would appear that the affiliation of the clubs into the Surf Life Saving Association of NSW (SLSA of NSW) in 1920 brought with it tighter control where the National Council 'consolidated its authority over the movement'.⁴⁷ Those officiating over the SLSA of NSW and later the SLSA of Australia were entrenched in masculinist ideals and did not think females to be 'fit' for the task.⁴⁸ Consequently, full membership was open only to males, with females being excluded from attaining their 'bronzes'.

Female roles were reduced to acting as members of committees or auxiliaries, looking after the female surf sheds, helping in fundraising, catering and supporting events such as the Beach Girl and Queen Contests. In 1930, Thirroul Surf Club reports, 'A Queen competition, which will embrace the South Coast Surf Clubs, is being launched', and the Bulli Club in 1938 comments on the formation of a ladies' auxiliary; 'The social spirit has been infused into Bulli Surf Club in very definite manner, following the formation of a ladies' auxiliary'. During World War Two, when active surf club members were severely reduced due to enlistment,

females in NSW were still not permitted to become full members. It was not until the 1950s that females were 'legally' allowed to enter club rooms; but then only on a Sunday night to cook the evening meal.⁴⁹ Finally, in 1980⁵⁰ females were officially able to 'cast off the traditional shackles of decorative and ornamental nurturers'⁵¹ and gain full member status as surf lifesavers on Australian beaches.

Humanitarianism: vigilance and service

The surf club movement has been linked in the literature to military-type practice and humanitarian ideology. It has been described as being 'rigid and highly formalised' with 'military-style bearing and attitudes',⁵² holding 'digger values',⁵³ with commitment to 'discipline, service, self-sacrifice and strength'.⁵⁴ The Illawarra surf club records embody prescriptive, regulating ideology that upholds human ethics and humanitarianism, in agreement with themes found in the literature. It is a discourse of responsibility and self-sacrifice, which adheres to the surf club motto of 'vigilance and service'. The motto itself is militaristic in nature, portraying strength and endurance with nationalist overtones. The records depict the humanitarian nature of the clubs reporting on statistics of 'lives saved' and 'first aid received' each season: 'It may be noted that no less than 169 lives were actually saved, while 191 members of the public received first aid'⁵⁵ and in 1937, '338 lives were saved'.⁵⁶ The 1932, Illawarra Branch annual report states that 'no drowning fatalities have occurred owing to the vigilance and efficiency of the Surf Life Saving Clubs embraced by this Branch'. 'Vigilance and service' are recurrent themes in the records with instances recorded such as: 'A deep hole in the surf last weekend kept the members on patrol on the alert. However, the Surf Life Saving Association's motto of "Vigilance and Service" was, as usual, well upheld and nothing serious eventuated'⁵⁷ and the 1944 Illawarra annual report stating:

We are greatly indebted to the active members, and to those older members since retired from the active membership list who have ungrudgingly and without hesitation answered the call and returned to carry out patrols and service our beaches according to the best traditions of our organization.

Discipline, training and eugenics

To uphold the motto of 'vigilance and service', club members were required to regulate their bodies through regimented military-type training, often working under harsh physical conditions: 'Patrols last weekend were carried out under adverse weather conditions. However, nothing short of a cyclone will stop some of our members'⁵⁸ and 'grave danger is often faced in affecting the rescues of persons in difficulty'.⁵⁹ Members took part in intense physical activities such as 'intensive drills' in order to acquire the 'ultimate body'. The surf club records portray the movement to be inspired by the science of eugenics, striving to achieve a

¹² Ibid., 2.

¹³ Ibid., 2.

¹⁴ Cumes, J., 1979. Their chastity was not too rigid: leisure times in early Australia. Melbourne, Longman Cheshire.

¹⁵ Ibid., 5.

¹⁶ Ibid., 2.

¹⁷ Rodwell, G., 1999. The sense of victorious struggle: The eugenic dynamic in Australian popular surf-culture, 1900-50. *Journal of Australian Studies* 28, 56-63.

¹⁸ Ibid., 17.

¹⁹ Sydney Mail, January 16, 1907.

²⁰ Fleming, A.P., 1969. Brighton Beach Wollongong. Illawarra Historical Society.

²¹ Illawarra Mercury, February 10, 1857.

²² Surf lifesaving Association of Australia: Illawarra Branch, 1963. The history of the growth of surf lifesaving on the Illawarra coast of NSW.

²³ Ibid., 22.

²⁴ Ibid., 1.

²⁵ Ibid., 1.

²⁶ Ibid., 22.

²⁷ Ibid., 22.

²⁸ Massey, D., 1999. Spaces of Politics. In *Human Geography Today*. Massey, D., et al. (Eds.), UK, Polity Press, 283.

²⁹ Massey, D., and Jess, P., 1995. Places and cultures in an uneven world. In: Massey, D., and Jess, P., (Eds.), *A place in the world? Places, cultures and globalization*. Oxford, The Open University, 222.

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³¹ Massey, D., 1994. Space, place and gender. Cambridge, Polity Press.

³² Ibid., 23.

³³ Foucault, M., 1980. Power/Knowledge. Brighton, Harvester.

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³⁸ Ibid., 5.

³⁹ Saunders, K., 1998. Specimens of Superb Manhood: The Lifesaver as a national Icon. *Journal of Australian Studies* 56, 96-105.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 39.

- ⁴¹ Ibid., 5.
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- ⁴³ Woonona Surf Club records, 1939.
- ⁴⁴ Wollongong Surf Club records, 1939.
- ⁴⁵ James, P., 1983. Lifesaver. Sydney, Lansdowne, 10.
- ⁴⁶ Ibid., 22.
- ⁴⁷ Ibid., 5, 79.
- ⁴⁸ Ibid., 5.
- ⁴⁹ Ibid., 5, 79.
- ⁵⁰ Ibid., 22.
- ⁵¹ Ibid., 5, 5.
- ⁵² Ibid., 5.
- ⁵³ Ibid., 39.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid., 4.
- ⁵⁵ Illawarra Branch, Annual Report, 1933.
- ⁵⁶ Illawarra Branch, Annual Report, 1937.
- ⁵⁷ Illawarra Branch, Surf Notes, 1937.
- ⁵⁸ Ibid., 57.
- ⁵⁹ Illawarra Branch records, 1935.
- ⁶⁰ Corrimal Surf Club records, 1937.
- ⁶¹ Illawarra Branch, Surf Notes, 1938.
- ⁶² Ibid., 5, 72.
- ⁶³ Corrimal Surf Club records, 1937.
- ⁶⁴ Ibid., 5, 67.
- ⁶⁵ Illawarra Branch, Annual Report, 1941.
- ⁶⁶ Illawarra Branch, Annual Report, 1944.

superior 'race'; the ultimate body of 'superb manhood'. Surf club members trained and worked in all kinds of weather, often 'struggling against the elements':

Weather again was unfavourable for surfing and stopped the beach being patronised by the surfers, but did not stop the members of our club. They possess the right spirit.⁶⁰

Strenuous work and discipline resulted in reward and achievement such as attaining the bronze medallion:

After passing...a severe test, a course of probation must be served during which the recruit receives instruction leading to the examination for the Bronze Medallion - the proficiency award of the Association.⁶¹

Arthur Lowe, pioneer Manly club member, comments on the discipline and training involved in the process of attaining the bronze medallion:

He must obey. Fulfill all orders as to chores, swimming practices, drills, lectures and carry out everything necessary to enable him to pass one of the hardest examinations in the world ever set humans; that is, the test for the bronze medallion.⁶²

Regulating the body also included competing within and between clubs, another important element from the beginning of the surf club movement. Alan Fitzgerald (of Corrimal Surf Club) won the senior belt championship of Australia at Bondi, in March 1936, 'the greatest honour this club and the Illawarra Branch has ever gained'.⁶³

Nationalism

The militaristic nature of the surf club movement embodied discipline, fitness and strength; values that are symbolic of nationalism and a healthy nation. Founding member of Manly Surf Club, A.W. Relph, is quoted saying:

...when Australia needs them, as some day no doubt she will, these men, trained athletes, tanned with the sun on the beaches, strong and brawny with the buffeting in the surf, will be well-fitted to take up their trust and do duty for their country.⁶⁴

By 1939 the SLSA of Australia had been firmly established and entrenched in nationalist ideals, therefore it is not surprising that many surf club members were 'on active service for King and Country' during World War Two. Tributes were paid to all members involved in the war effort by the SLSA which was proud to have

had a hand in the training and discipline of their members:

The Illawarra Branch S.L.S.A. extends the best wishes to all the members who are in the various Fighting Services. We are proud of them and we say 'God Speed and a Safe and Victorious Return'.⁶⁵

According to the Illawarra Branch, 333 members joined the 'Fighting Services' and 14 'paid the supreme sacrifice' in the war.⁶⁶

In conclusion, this article has examined the emergence of the surf lifesaving movement in the Illawarra between 1900 and 1945. An analysis of the surf club records has helped to shed light on how surf lifesaving has been socially constructed through discourse and discursive practices. The surf club discourse celebrates masculinity, humanitarianism, discipline, eugenics and nationalism. The discourse constructs the beach space through a prescriptive regulating discourse that upholds ethical codes such as responsibility and self sacrifice. It regulates the body through fitness and training, portraying eugenic and nationalist ideals. It silences the cultural attachment of the indigenous peoples to the beach space and reduces female involvement to auxiliary roles. However, this is just one of the discourses found on the Illawarra beaches and again, only one way of reading and interpreting the surf club records.

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